

GUINEA-BISSAU 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution establishes the separation of religion and state and the responsibility of the state to respect and protect legally recognized religious groups. It states that all citizens are equal under the law, with the same rights and obligations irrespective of their religion, and it recognizes the freedom of religious groups to teach their faith.

In January, President Umaro Sissoco Embalo attended a consecration ceremony for the new Bishop of Bissau, Jose Lampra Ca, along with other senior members of the government. President Sissoco and other government officials also attended a separate ceremony to install the new president of the Imam's Union. In July, vandalism at a Catholic church in a majority-Muslim town created tension between Catholics and Muslims. Catholics criticized President Sissoco for reportedly downplaying the incident. The government continued its policy of not providing free food to Muslims during Ramadan. The government also temporarily cut tax exemptions for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and religious groups as part of an overall review of tax and customs exemptions. The government attempted to restrict the transmission of a church's radio broadcast that other religious communities had accused of promoting division and intolerance.

Religious leaders in the country agreed that different ethnic and religious groups were mostly respectful and tolerant of one another throughout the country. Representatives from Islamic, Catholic, and Evangelical communities gathered for an inaugural two-day conference and produced a common agenda of religious leaders for the promotion of peace and prevention of radicalism and violent extremism in the country. The agenda included provisions to create a platform for dialogue and to institutionalize an annual day of inter-religious reflection to promote peace. During the year, nine individuals died from violence in cases related to witchcraft, compared with six such deaths in 2021. Several churches and mosques utilized radio to more widely broadcast both religious and nonreligious content.

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. The United States directs its engagement in the country from the U.S. Embassy in Dakar, Senegal. In March and in November, a visiting official from the U.S. Liaison Office to Guinea-Bissau at the Embassy in Dakar met separately with Muslim and Christian religious leaders in Bissau to discuss issues of tolerance and coexistence and their concern regarding the spread of religious extremism.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.0 million (midyear 2022). Estimates of the religious composition of the population vary widely, but according to the Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project (2020), approximately 46 percent are Muslim, 31 percent follow indigenous religious practices, and 19 percent are Christian. Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, and those unaffiliated with any religious group.

The Fula (Peuhl or Fulani) and Mandinka (Malinke) ethnic groups are the most numerous followers of Islam. Muslims generally live in the north and northeast, and most Muslims are Sunni; Shia communities exist as well. Adherents of indigenous religious beliefs generally live in all but the northern parts of the country. The Christian population, including Roman Catholics and Protestants, is primarily drawn from the Pepel, Manjaco, and Balanta ethnic groups and is concentrated in Bissau and along the coast. Catholics represent more than half of the Christian population, while Brazilian Protestant and other Protestant denominations maintain a significant number of congregations and missions throughout the country. Large numbers of Muslims and Christians hold indigenous beliefs as well.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution stipulates the state shall be separate from religious institutions and shall respect and protect legally recognized religious groups, whose activities shall be subject to the law. It holds freedom of conscience and religion as inviolable, even if the state declares a state of siege, and provides for freedom of worship so long as it does not violate the fundamental principles cited in the

constitution. It establishes that all citizens are equal under the law, with the same rights and obligations, irrespective of their religion. Political parties and labor unions are barred from affiliating with a particular religious group. The constitution recognizes the freedom of religious groups to teach their faith.

The government requires religious groups to obtain licenses. The formal process, which is not often followed, entails providing the name, location, type, and size of the organization to the Ministry of Justice. Under the law, religious groups are recognized as associations. The state temporarily suspended tax exemptions for NGOs and religious bodies for importing goods and products. In accordance with the constitution, religious instruction is not permitted in public schools. The Ministry of Education enforces this prohibition. There are some private schools operated by religious groups. Private schools must meet government-approved curriculum standards and receive Ministry of Education validation in order to grant nationally recognized diplomas or completion certificates. The government-approved curriculum standards require a broader base of conventional subjects, such as science and the Portuguese language, rather than a more limited curriculum of Arabic and Quranic studies, as offered in some Islamic schools.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

In January, President Sissoco attended a consecration ceremony for the new Bishop of Bissau, Jose Lampra Ca, along with other senior members of the government. The Catholic community issued a special invitation to a senior delegation from the Islamic community to attend the ceremony as well. At this event, the president of the National Islamic Council (CNI) called on the new bishop to continue to work together to strengthen interreligious relations in the country. President Sissoco and other government officials also attended a separate ceremony to install the new president of the Imam's Union.

Also in January, a Catholic priest stated he received death threats after posting critical comments about President Sissoco on social media. The priest's comments were in response to Sissoco's remarks that Bishop Lampra Ca had meddled in politics following a recent meeting between the bishop and Prime Minister Nuno Nabiam, during which the bishop expressed his conviction that the

country belonged to all its citizens. The President responded that religious leaders belonged in their places of worship and never in politics. The priest's social media message demanded respect for the bishop and defended the bishop's right to comment on issues affecting the public. On January 6, the Bissau-Guinean League of Human Rights issued a statement condemning those issuing threats and urging the authorities to investigate.

Following an armed attack on President Sissoco and other government officials in a coup attempt in early February at the government palace, senior religious leaders encouraged each other to work within their communities to encourage peace and stability in the country. They launched a campaign of dialogue with government, military, and other religious leaders to help overcome the incident and to create a calmer and more peaceful environment in the country.

During the year, the government continued a 2021 policy of no longer donating rice and sugar to the Muslim community during Ramadan. The government also ended its attempts to acquire donations from other sources, including foreign governments, to support travelers to Mecca for the annual pilgrimage.

In July, some media sources criticized President Sissoco for downplaying the significance of the vandalism of a Catholic church in Gabu that destroyed a crucifix and religious images important to the Catholic community. Sissoco compared the damage to incidents of stolen nonreligious items from mosques, such as clocks, fans, and air conditioners.

In September, the government issued an order to temporarily suspend tax exemptions for NGOs and religious bodies on imported goods and products. The Ministry of Finance clarified that the decision was part of the process to survey and balance customs and tax exemptions for all organizations. As of year's end, the suspension remained in effect.

The Ministry of Commerce directed an independent Pentecostal church, the Igreja Assembleia De Deus, to limit the transmission of its radio programming to within 60 kilometers (36 miles) of its broadcast station. The church asked the government to reconsider. Igreja Assembleia reported it did not know why the government ordered the restriction. Other religious leaders, however, had previously reported that Igreja Assembleia promoted division, intolerance, and

disrespect toward other religions. Igreja Assembleia's leader responded that there was no intent to attack any other religious groups, but that the church's interpretation of the Bible differs from that of others. The leader also stated that the church had been criticized for its opposition to forced marriages and its efforts to assist victims of forced marriages. At year's end, the church was still broadcasting beyond the 60-kilometer limit ordered by the government, and there were no repercussions reported for the church's failure to comply.

In December, as part of a visit to the Diocesan Major Seminary, Prime Minister Nabiam invited all Bissau-Guineans to work for peace in the country. The Prime Minister spoke to journalists at the seminary, identifying it as a place that had welcomed and housed members of the government following the February attack on government officials at the Government Palace.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Religious leaders in Bissau agreed that different ethnic and religious groups were mostly respectful and tolerant of one another throughout the country. A Catholic leader described the country as a laboratory of pacific coexistence between religions, with a tendency toward mutual respect. The leader said that the country was probably the best example in the region of religious coexistence.

Leaders from different religious groups spoke positively of past efforts to meet with each other to address matters of concern. Financial constraints, however, limited the ability of groups to meet with each other over the past year. In January, a senior imam visited a Catholic congregation in Portugal at the invitation of a Portuguese Catholic leader who had previously met with the National Council of Imams at a mosque in Guinea-Bissau. According to the imam, the Portuguese leader expressed his admiration for the country's inter-religious relations and its tradition of respect among religions.

During the year, EU funding ended for a project to address violence resulting from allegations of witchcraft. The project implementer, the NGO Human Rights League of Guinea-Bissau (HRL), reported that through early November, nine individuals died from violence in cases related to witchcraft, compared with six deaths in 2021.

In another case, a dispute between two neighbors resulted in one neighbor shooting the other, reportedly due to an allegation of witchcraft. HRL stated that similar cases typically arose due to ignorance and misunderstandings. HRL created a task force to prevent such violence.

In December, representatives from Islamic, Catholic, and Evangelical religious communities gathered for an inaugural two-day conference in Bissau as part of the No Cudji Paz project, funded by the European Union and Camoes – Institute of Cooperation and Language. At the conclusion of the conference, the group released a common agenda for the promotion of peace and prevention of radicalism and violent extremism in the country. The agenda included provisions to create a platform for inter-religious dialogue and to institutionalize an annual day of inter-religious reflection to promote peace and dialogue.

Some religious leaders reported that the spread of religious extremism was due to the country's porous borders and endemic poverty. One religious leader identified some mosques as operating with funds from outside the country and trying to attract members with gifts or food. The leader identified Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Iran, as well as two Islamic organizations headquartered in Senegal, as potential funding sources.

Another religious leader expressed concern over how easy it is for religious extremists to hide in the country, all the while quietly indoctrinating others to adopt more extreme religious views.

An incident of vandalism in July at the recently rebuilt Saint Elizabeth Catholic Church in Gabu created tension between religious communities. Vandals smashed a crucifix and destroyed religious images important to the Catholic community. One NGO reported the vandalism was the first such incident in the country's history. Witnesses could not identify the perpetrators, and leaders from all religious groups denounced the incident. A Catholic leader noted the response of some Islamic students from the Gabu region who spoke out against the vandalism in the spirit of friendship and alliance.

Several churches and mosques utilized radio to broadcast more widely both religious and nonreligious content. The Imam's Union of Guinea-Bissau continued to broadcast a radio program aimed at both Muslim and non-Muslim religious leaders every Friday afternoon. The Imam's Union indicated that more than 70 percent of the weekly broadcast addressed social issues, and that the program included a question-and-answer period in which listeners could send chat messages, with questions and comments. The program, which reportedly extended to over 95 percent of the country, allowed imams to address topics of interest or concern. The union indicated that the ability to provide information rapidly and receive messages from listeners through this format helped to identify and address issues of importance, such as the potential spread of religious extremism.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. The United States directs its engagement with the country from the U.S. Embassy in Dakar, Senegal. In March and November, a member of the Guinea-Bissau Liaison Office of the Embassy in Dakar met with Islamic, Catholic, and evangelical leaders in Bissau, renewing prior discussions related to issues of tolerance and coexistence. Locally employed staff based in Bissau and three American personnel based at the Embassy in Dakar maintained contact with multiple religious leaders, staff, and adherents throughout the year.